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EXPRESS

William Henry Smith

1827–1867 | Oregon and San Francisco, California

Working Reflections and Research Notes
Jeffrey Hunt | July 7, 2026; revised August 2026

Photograph and Album Provenance

This photograph comes from the Wells–Smith family album, a substantial collection of approximately one hundred photographs dating from the 1850s through the early twentieth century, with many concentrated in the 1870s. Most remain in their original album positions, although several are loose and a small number are missing. The album contains members of both the Smith and Wells families and appears to have belonged to John Lewis Smith and Esther Wells Smith. It descended through their daughter Bertha Smith, then to Blanche Toner Deer, and later to Jeffrey Hunt. This chain of family custody provides the working provenance for the album and helps explain why photographs from several interconnected Douglas County pioneer families remain together.

The photograph is a carte de visite, approximately 2½ × 4 inches, produced by Bradley & Rulofson, one of the leading portrait studios of nineteenth-century San Francisco. The partnership of Henry William Bradley and William Herman Rulofson became known for technically accomplished portraiture and photographed civic leaders, merchants, military officers, politicians, performers, and other prominent Californians. Their work is preserved in major museum and archival collections, making the studio imprint an important clue to the date and social setting of this portrait.

The reverse bears a five-cent United States Internal Revenue stamp, placing this print within the federal photographic-tax period of 1864–1866. For cataloging purposes, 1865 is used as a reasonable single-year estimate. Another period print from the same Bradley & Rulofson negative is held by the Oregon Historical Society and is also identified as William Smith, providing independent support for the identification and confirming that more than one original print was made from the sitting.

William Henry Smith

William Henry Smith was born 4 June 1827 in Virginia, the son of Richard Smith and Martha Ann ("Patsy") Pitzer Smith. The 1850 United States Federal Census enumerated him at age twenty-two in St. Clair County, Missouri, where he was listed as a farmer in his parents' household.

Secondary compilations connected with the 1853 Smith–Beale migration describe William as single and as having died young in the California mines. Several online family trees give the precise death date and place as 7 July 1867 at Chico, Butte County, California. That date is retained here as the current working date, but no contemporary death register, obituary, probate file, cemetery record, or other primary source has yet been located to confirm it. A Find a Grave memorial for a different William Henry Smith who died in Washington in 1908 does not match this family and should not be used.

The Bradley & Rulofson portrait establishes that William was alive and in San Francisco during approximately 1864–1866. Whether he lived there, was passing through, or was traveling between Oregon and the mining districts remains unknown. The exact circumstances of his life and death in California remain among the principal subjects of continuing research.

Family

William was one of the children of Richard Smith and Martha Ann ("Patsy") Pitzer Smith, who came west with their family in 1853. Several brothers are particularly important to reconstructing William's movements and the broader family story.

- Robert Smith (1822–1888) came to Oregon with the Applegate–Waldo party in 1843. Family accounts state that his favorable descriptions of Oregon encouraged his parents to migrate west ten years later. Robert traveled to the California gold fields in 1848, returned to Oregon in 1849, established a Donation Land Claim in Douglas County, and married Susan Applegate, daughter of Charles Applegate, in 1850.
- Bernard Pitzer Smith (1823–1882), William's older brother, became closely associated with the founding of Myrtle Creek and served as captain of the Smith–Beale party in 1853. Secondary sources state that Bernard had been to the California mines before 1853. Charles W. Beale's memoir identifies Bernard and William together as the two brothers who had previously come west, "made quite a stake," and returned for their parents.
- John Lewis Smith (1831–1889), Jeffrey Hunt's second-great-grandfather, later settled near Rice Hill, married Esther Wells, and is reported to have gone to the California mines with his brothers. The timing of that journey remains uncertain. His marriage to Esther Wells helps explain why Smith and Wells family photographs were preserved together in the album.
- Jane Ann Smith married Stephen F. Chadwick in 1855, linking the Smith family to another prominent Oregon pioneer family. The remaining siblings—Frances Elizabeth, Mary Virginia, James Beale, Maria Louise, and Margaret—may provide additional research leads through family papers, probate files, land transactions, memoirs, and photographs.

Together, these relationships connect the Smith family with the Applegate, Wells, Chadwick, Beale, Pitzer, Hall, and other pioneer families whose records may contain indirect references to William.

1850 Federal Census

The 1850 United States Federal Census enumerated William Henry Smith, age twenty-two, and Bernard Pitzer Smith, age twenty-six, in the household of their parents in District 79, St. Clair County, Missouri. Both brothers were listed as farmers.

The census provides an important fixed point. It confirms that Bernard and William were in Missouri by August 1850, before the family's documented departure for Oregon in May 1853. If they had already made an earlier western journey, they had returned by the time they were enumerated.

Earlier Western Journey

Charles W. Beale traveled with the Smith family in 1853, drove cattle in their outfit, and was related to the family through the Pitzer line. He recalled that Bernard ("Pitzer") and William had previously come west, "made quite a stake," and returned for their parents. Beale also wrote: "The Smith boys were the owners of the outfit that I came in."

In the surviving transcription, the year appears only as "185-," leaving the final digit uncertain. The incomplete date need not refer to the year of their first departure; it may refer to their return to Missouri after an earlier trip. The 1850 census is consistent with that possibility.

The exact date, route, and destination of the brothers' first journey remain unresolved. The memoir does not explain whether their "stake" came from mining, livestock, land, trade, wages, or several activities combined.

California

Secondary compilations associated with the 1853 migration preserve three important statements:

- Bernard Pitzer Smith had been to the California mines before 1853.
- William Henry Smith was unmarried and reportedly died young in the California mines.
- John Lewis Smith went to the California mines with his brothers.

These statements may describe more than one journey involving different combinations of the brothers. Bernard's mining experience is specifically placed before 1853; William's reported death belongs to a later period; and the date of John Lewis Smith's trip is not given.

The scale of the family's 1853 outfit makes the meaning of Beale's "stake" especially interesting. Accounts describe five wagons and a red-wheeled phaeton for Richard and Patsy Smith, while Beale recalled twelve ox teams, a four-mule team, and more than five hundred cattle. It remains unknown whether earlier earnings helped purchase or assemble this outfit, whether the livestock was already family property, or whether the herd represented a broader commercial undertaking.

William's San Francisco portrait and the repeated report that he died in the California mines provide a firm California connection, but no exact sequence of mining trips has yet been established.

The Henry Smith Problem

Walter E. Meacham's 1947 booklet Applegate Trail, in the chapter "The Smiths Carry On," recounts the crisis faced by the 1846 Southern Route emigrants in Umpqua Canyon. Captain William Smith reportedly urged the men to continue working through the obstruction, then collapsed and died. Another emigrant, Henry Smith, specifically described as "no relative of the late captain," was chosen to lead the company. He ordered the wagons abandoned and reorganized the party for the difficult journey ahead.

Meacham later describes Henry Smith reacting with extraordinary relief when a rescue party and provisions arrived. The storytelling is vivid, but Meacham wrote roughly a century after the journey, and the earlier source behind the episode still needs to be identified.

The possibility is especially intriguing because William's older brother Robert Smith had already come to Oregon with the Applegate–Waldo party in 1843 and was among the men associated with opening the Southern Route from the Oregon side in 1846. If William were the Henry Smith coming from the east, the brothers would have approached the new route from opposite directions.

At present, the overlapping accounts involve at least three distinct Smith identities: Captain William Smith; the unrelated Henry Smith who succeeded him in 1846; and William Henry Smith of the Douglas County family. William would have been about eighteen or nineteen in 1846. His identification with the second Henry Smith remains an intriguing research breadcrumb, not a conclusion.

Oregon Land Claims

Bernard Pitzer Smith established himself in the Myrtle Creek area, while John Lewis Smith later settled near Rice Hill. No Oregon Donation Land Claim has yet been identified for William Henry Smith.

William may have filed a claim that was abandoned or never perfected, occupied land informally, acquired property by purchase, or never established a permanent Oregon holding. Beale's statement that Bernard and William had "made quite a stake" also leaves open the possibility that land formed part of their earlier western experience, but no property associated with William has yet been identified.

Future searches should include completed, cancelled, and unperfected Donation Land Claims; Roseburg Land Office registers; deeds; tax rolls; mining records; probate files; and newspapers under William Smith, William H. Smith, William Henry Smith, Henry Smith, W. H. Smith, and Wm. H. Smith.

Research Questions

- When did Bernard Pitzer Smith and William Henry Smith first travel west, and does Beale's "185-" refer to their departure, their return to Missouri, or another event?
- What did Beale mean by "made quite a stake"? Did the brothers earn money through California mining, Oregon land, livestock, freighting, trade, or another enterprise, and did those resources help equip the unusually large 1853 outfit?
- Can William's life in Oregon and California be documented through land-office records, deeds, tax rolls, mining records, voter registrations, probate files, newspapers, cemetery records, or other contemporary sources?
- What is the original source for the repeated report that William died on 7 July 1867 at Chico, and where was he buried?
- Can the Henry Smith in "The Smiths Carry On" be identified through contemporary 1846 rosters, diaries, newspaper reports, or family records, and can the other Smith families on the Southern Route be clearly distinguished?
- What source lies behind the Lost Wagon Train family summaries stating that Bernard mined before 1853, William died in the California mines, and John Lewis went to the mines with his brothers?
- What additional diaries, memoirs, correspondence, pioneer interviews, county histories, and manuscript collections mention the Smith–Beale migration, the Lost Wagon Train, the Elliott Cutoff, or the Southern Route?

References

- **Bradley & Rulofson.** Carte de visite portrait of William Henry Smith, San Francisco, approximately 1864–1866. Family copy from the Wells–Smith album; five-cent United States Internal Revenue stamp on reverse.
- **Oregon Historical Society Digital Collections. "Smith, William."** Catalog record for another period print from the same Bradley & Rulofson negative. https://staff.digitalcollections.ohs.org/smith-william
- **1850 United States Federal Census.** District 79, St. Clair County, Missouri, household of Richard and Patsy Ann Smith; William H. Smith and B. Pitzer Smith enumerated as farmers.
- **Beale, Charles William. "Byogofy of C. W. Beale."** Late-life memoir recounting the 1853 migration and the brothers' earlier western journey; surviving transcription renders the year as "185-." https://www.oregonpioneers.com/beale.htm
- **Oregon Pioneers. "Emigrants to Oregon in 1846."** Secondary compilation useful for distinguishing the Smith families associated with the first Southern Route migration. https://www.oregonpioneers.com/1846.htm
- **Oregon Pioneers. "Emigrants to Oregon in 1850."** Lists Pitzer and William Smith and repeats the account that they returned east for their parents. https://www.oregonpioneers.com/1850.htm
- **Oregon Pioneers. "Emigrants to Oregon in 1853."** Secondary roster associating the Smith family with the Lost Wagon Train and Elliott Cutoff migration. https://www.oregonpioneers.com/1853.htm
- **Meacham, Walter E. Applegate Trail.** Oregon Council, American Pioneer Trails Association, 1947. See "The Smiths Carry On," beginning on printed page 19. https://occgs.com/projects/rescue/locations/oregon/VARIOUS%20CO._OR_MISC%202.pdf

- **Truwe, Ben. "The Southern Route, 1846."** Collection of contemporary reports, later reminiscences, and related material on the opening and first use of the Applegate or Southern Route. https://truwe.sohs.org/files/southernroute.html

Research Log

- August 2026 — Confirmed the 1850 census household in St. Clair County, Missouri, including William and Bernard as farmers.
- August 2026 — Located the online Beale transcription showing the incomplete date "185-."
- August 2026 — Located secondary family summaries stating that Bernard mined in California before 1853, William died in the California mines, and John Lewis went to the mines with his brothers.
- August 2026 — Dated the Bradley & Rulofson print to 1864–1866 from the five-cent revenue stamp and identified a second print in the Oregon Historical Society collection.
- August 2026 — Identified Walter Meacham's "The Smiths Carry On" as the source of the 1846 Henry Smith lead.

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